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ABSTRACT

While the importance of vocational education in today's economic climate cannot be denied, the current trend toward isolated career training should be countered with the recognition that a college education, the liberal arts in general, and the study of history in particular are vital agents in man's attempt to change society for the better. Indeed, historical studies enable students to understand the human consequences of the academic or technological principles they encounter and thus provide a necessary balance between career training and preparation for life. In addition, a sense of history allows the individual to identify the universal values that influence his/her behavior--the loss of this capability portends the loss of collective and individual identity. If history is to be restored to its rightful place in the curriculum, educators must abandon their traditional emphasis on the mastery of isolated facts and attempt to enlarge students' horizons, deepen their sensibilities, and help them transcend their prejudices through the presentation of opposing historical analyses. History instructors should increase their visibility in the community, make more use of available educational media, and restructure survey courses to include the history of ordinary people. By relating history to contemporary life, instructors can demonstrate that the students are themselves agents of social change. (JP)

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HISTORY AS THE CORE OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

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HISTORY AS THE CORE OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

We all know and cherish the oft-quoted phrases "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," or that "History is to society what memory is to the individual." But more and more community college students today are asking "What good is the study of history to me? Will it help me get a job?" These concerns are understandable and the history profession is well aware of the situation. It seems that much of the recent decline in liberal arts studies is taking place in fields furthest removed from direct job opportunities. Students concentrate on career opportunities to avoid the uncertainties of the job market in the midst of continuing economic instability.

Yet college, and all higher education, must be more than a marketplace, and community colleges especially must guard against a trend toward vocational training exclusively. We will never go back to the standard, traditional liberal arts education with narrowly-set required courses, but neither can we opt for isolated career training. History is the one discipline that can provide for society a bridge linking the sciences, humanities and social sciences. If college is the intellectual and social meeting ground for the exchange of ideas, the imparting of knowledge, and training for citizenship and life, history is the core - it is the focal point for the integration of virtually any course of study. It provides a way to understand human life and the world. As humankind's oldest intellectual pursuit, history is best defined as human self-knowledge. No other discipline can

more easily interpret every other subject of study on campus. Historical studies provide the necessary balance between career training, learning about the human condition, and preparation for living. Individual needs, society's needs, life needs and practical information are brought in flux under the umbrella of history departments. We provide options for pre-professional students by concentrating on the humanizing elements of any professional orientation. History teaches us how we came to be the way we are - as such it is a process of self-identification. All beginning students in college should come into contact with courses that focus on general themes touching upon basic concepts dealing with life historically - a process of growth and change. We study the collective record of humankind's experience - successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses, triumphs and tragedies - an exciting and stimulating range of inquiry which includes survey courses as well as special interest and topical courses.

In short, history is the core of any college student's education - the single best unifying principle of organization and outlook. History is also a serious academic subject that trains the mind, emphasizing the development of a critical faculty for analysis and interpretation - not of a dead past but the past reinterpreted through the mind and events of the present. All history is contemporary history. The study of history is not a trend or a fad. It continues to serve traditional interests as well as worthwhile innovations. It harmonizes the desire to learn and need to take meaningful action in our lives.

In the past it was firmly believed that a liberal arts education, with history and philosophy as the core, provided a common body of knowledge which would be the foundation for advanced study in any professional field, or as a point of departure for research, or simply for the accumulation of knowledge to help solve society's problems. This confidence has been shattered and the liberal arts face a crisis of purpose. Federal and state governments emphasize that the purpose of higher education is to provide manpower to meet anticipated national needs. Sputnik forced our own government towards a narrow view of education for utilitarian objectives - to catch the USSR in science and technology. While not denying the importance of this objective, in general, I think it is imperative to combine it with the notion that college, the liberal arts in general, history in particular, must play a direct role in changing society for the better.

Education in history offers the best means to explore basic human questions, to help individuals combine lifelong intellectual curiosity with a capacity to feel for the continuing and changing needs of humankind.

After all, the people in our classrooms are now students not pupils - they voluntarily desire to learn. The basis of that learning should be both realistic and idealistic - both historical and philosophical. The subject of history is what human beings have been, what they are and what they ought to be:

- both what it means and what it can mean to be human. We

can't produce citizens who are technicians, or scientists, or professionals, or para-professionals without an attempt to identify universal values which influence our behavior, to judge these values and to apply them both for the individual and for society at large. The root of the word liberal, as in liberal arts is libera which means free. When people tell me that a liberal arts education with history as the core isn't very useful if it only teaches us how to think, I fear for the future of our colleges and our society. Without the search for truth there is no freedom.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said a man is a man before he is anything else and that he must be a man to be free at all. Marx reminds us that to be radical means to go to the root of things and for man the root of all things is man.

The study of history reminds all of us, no matter what chosen field we enter, that the world did not begin when we were born - it gives us a sense of history, lacking in the very young and political leaders. Everyone should have some sense of man's social nature and political nature as well.

To be free and strong we should understand not only history, but the assumptions which underlie a reconstruction of the past. Our task is not simply to know physics, or chemistry, but to understand how they approach and define reality - not simply to study economics, but to be able to discuss the human consequences of following one economic theory over another - to be sensitive to the consequences, or goals

of business practices - to see the law not as a specialist, but as a person concerned with broader ramifications of legal formulas.

In short, with history as a core of any college education we can perceive how issues relate to the dignity and worth of the individual, and hopefully use this knowledge in bettering our lives and preserving the future for posterity.

Right now we seem to be living in that state of mind described by Kierkegaard as "a kind of world historical forgetfulness." This loss of a sense of history, the collective memory of mankind, means a loss of our own identity. Restoring history to its rightful state in the curriculum means much more than increasing enrollments. It is essential for society and civilization.

What is to be done? Can we begin by at least tentatively agreeing with some of Paul Ward's suggestions for proper objectives for the learning process in history: 1) a respect for the past of human experience, and confidence that the past yields insights on the present 2) mastery of historical questions with seriousness and open-mindedness concerning values in a way that self-revelation and self-discovery take place 3) development of a critical and analytical faculty and the ability to think through a mass of data and arrive at sound conclusions? I do not believe we can simply continue doing what we have been doing, hoping against hope that the good old days return. The greatly widened diversity of students since 1950 and through television their widened sensibilities (for better or for worse) force on historians a rethinking of the right coverage for each learning process, and

heightened teacher-student collaboration. We must shift from an emphasis on the mastery of meaningless fragments which trivializes history, and prepares students "for the examination" to the attempt to enlarge horizons, deepen sensibilities and transcend prejudices by presenting and balancing opposing analyses and interpretations.

Myron A. Marty, a prominent community college history teacher, sees history in the community college as a liberating discipline. We teach a more heterogeneous group in terms of age, economic status, and social class. Our students are not only preparing for life, but living it. We should teach such students in liberating ways, making the world his beat, and humankind of the centuries his circle of friends. Our subject matter is not merely or only a body of material to be covered. Let us begin practicing what we defend rather than spending so much time defending what we practice. In the classroom our work should reflect the need to rethink continually our courses, course offerings, methods and goals. I am not suggesting that everyone should be doing the same things, but that everyone cooperate in a spirit of hard work and sacrifice with a constructive attitude on the side of excellence in teaching and research.

Do not be afraid to use media where it is appropriate and works for you, whether it be slides, music, videotapes, clips from historically-oriented feature films, or the films themselves. I have had great success with films like The Gospel According to

St. Matthew, The Seventh Seal, Cromwell, Marat/Sade, Battle of Algiers, Burn!, Grand Illusion, Paths of Glory, and others. Encourage student participation in classroom skits, simulations, student-made films, or historical role playing.

Or at the very least reinterpret the basic surveys in new and challenging and interesting ways. Include the history of ordinary people, giving our constituency an historical world with which they can identify.

Outside of the classroom make ties to the community you serve by involvement in local histories, museums, fraternal and ethnic organizations. Speak on historical topics before local groups: Businesses or high schools, and where applicable offer special interest courses.

These are some of the things that can be done. I reject the notion that this is pandering or gimmickry. We are engaged in a discipline that teaches that people are the agency of change in history. We deal with the study of cultures. Culture is unique to man, because only man can change his reality and demand a deeper meaning and a higher life - individual or collective. The teaching of history must be more than simply documentation of the past; it must affirm reality. Through studying past human ways of being, even in the basic survey, we should also relate the real conditions of our own students' existence. This is the lifeblood of education in history, which gives students abilities and perceptions that, once discovered, strike him as priceless and eternal.

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